The Prince and the Republican*

by James A. Jobling

The Andean Condor *Vultur gryphus* was the first bird species described by the father of zoological nomenclature, Carl Linnaeus, in 1758. The Araguaia Woodcreeper *Hylexetastes brigidai* was described by José Cardoso da Silva, Fernando Novaes, and David Oren in 1995. Those intervening years have seen over 50,000 generic, subgeneric, specific, and subspecific names proposed for birds, usually by single authors (although the present trend seems to call for a minimum of three authors, e.g. Udzungwa Forest Partridge *Xenoperdix udzungwensis* Dinesen, Lehmberg, Svendsen, Hansen, and Fjeldså, 1994; Nechisar Nightjar *Caprimulgus solala* Safford, Ash, Duckworth, Telfer, and Zewdie, 1995). Linnaeus's unillustrated description of *Vultur gryphus* totalled twenty-seven words and abbreviations, including two references and an indication of habitat. *Hylexetastes brigidai* was dealt with in nearly seven closely printed pages, including two sketchmaps, three pen and ink drawings, and nearly a page of references. The striking differences between the two descriptions highlight the tightening procedures which have accompanied the advances made in nomenclature over 237 years. Linnaeus had been an innovator, a free agent, whose system, simpler yet superior to anything that had gone before, was eagerly adopted by the world's scientific community. If the ornithologists of the twentieth century wish to ensure that their new names are enshrined for posterity they must closely follow the diktats of the current International Code of Zoological Nomenclature (ICZN).

The scientific names proposed for birds may be divided statistically as follows (percentages as totals of currently recognized taxa): (1) morphonyms (Greek *morphe*, form; *onuma*, name), generic 44.8%, specific 56.7%; (2) eponyms (Greek *eponumos*, called after), generic 6%, specific 19%; (3) aboriginyms (Latin *aborigines*, natives), generic 12.1%, specific 3.5%; (4) toponyms (Greek *topos*, place), generic 1.8%, specific 11.8%; (5) taxonyms (Greek *taxis*, arrangement), generic 9.9%, specific 3%; (6) bionyms (Greek *bios*, life), generic 9.7%, specific 2.4%; (7) ergonyms (Greek *ergon*, work), generic 7.3%, specific 2%; (8) phagonyms (Greek *phagein*, to eat), generic 5.6%, specific 0.4%; (9) gerynyms (Greek *gerus*, voice), generic 2.6%, specific 1.2%.

Morphonyms refer to the plumage, colours, and physical characteristics of birds. The specific name *Panurus biarmicus* was possibly Linnaeus's (1758) attempt at latinizing Eleazar Albin's (1738) names "Parus beardmanica" and "The Beardmanica" for the Bearded Tit with reference to the black moustaches of the cock bird. However, according to Newton and Gadow (1896) the name is a toponym, after the region of Biarmia, an old term for the district of Perm in northern Russia. Tommy Tyrberg (pers. comm.) supports this etymology (from Old Norse "Bjarmaland", the part mythical area around the White Sea mentioned in several sagas and mediaeval chronicles). At first sight the

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generic *Anodorhynchus* for the Hyacinthine Macaw *A. hyacinthinus* seems a pointless name (Greek *anodon*, toothless; *rhunkhos*, bill), since no recent birds have teeth. The name, however, refers to the un-notched bill of this huge parrot compared to other macaws *Ara*. Incidentally, Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire and Baron Cuvier claimed that embryo parakeets *Psittacula* showed traces of teeth such as occurred in ancient birds and their dinosaur cousins, a startling 'discovery' that led to the coining of *Palaeornis* (Greek *palaios*, ancient; *ornis*, bird) by Vigors (1825). The seemingly obvious and, therefore, pointless name *Alaemon alaudipes* ("lark-footed [lark]") given to the Hoopoe Lark becomes more acceptable when it is realized that, because of its curved bill and striking pied wing-pattern, the species was originally described as a type of Hoopoe *Upupa*. Lastly in this category may be mentioned *Larus atricilla* ("black-tailed gull"), Linnaeus's name (1758) for the Laughing Gull. The erroneous use of New Latin *cilla* for "tail" can be traced back to faulty mediaeval translation of Varro's name *motacilla* for a wagtail, but in the case of this gull Linnaeus undoubtedly misread his own shorthand for *atricapilla* ("black-headed").

Eponyms are coined after real, fictitious, or mythical people. Their use as specific epithets has always been popular, and the trend is increasing. For example, just over 58 per cent of the new species described in the period 1981–1990 have been so named, and the figure rises to 75 per cent in the two major American journals for the years 1991–1993. The use of personal names in the formation of compound genus group names has long been objectionable, but Prince Charles Bonaparte revelled in such as *Blythipicus*, *Graydidascalus*, *Juliamyia*, *Reinwardtoena*, *Smithiglaux*, and *Thouarsitreron*, to the disgust of more conservative workers. The practice of naming new birds of paradise and other beautiful species after kings and queens was anathema to the Prince's fiercely republican sentiments. In proposing (1850) *respublica* for Wilson's Bird of Paradise *Diphyllodes* he voiced a lack of respect for all the rulers of the world but, at the same time, expressed his disenchantment with the French Republic which he considered had been turned into a hell by the machinations and arrogance of soi-disant republicans. By coining this name he ensured that, since there could not be a paradisean republic, there could at least be a republican [bird of] paradise. In doing so, however, he 'hijacked' the specimen bought and donated by Edward Wilson and destined for the Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, and the Prince's description was published barely six months before John Cassin's *D. wilsonii* based on the unique specimen. Bonaparte's precipitate action, the enthusiasm of a restless, driven man, was not appreciated by the American scientific community, who refused to use *respublica* for many years thereafter.

Greek mythology has played a significant rôle in nomenclature, and the classics were widely trawled by early naturalists. The generic appellation *Penelope* Merrem 1786 for the Neotropical guans has always seemed arbitrary, although most authors agree that it refers to Penelope, wife of the hero Ulysses. Recent researches have revealed another spelling *Penelophe*, which makes sense (Latin *pene*, almost; Greek *lophos*, crest) and alludes to the fuller crest of the Marail Guan

P. marail. However, Teixeira (1995) suggests that the generic term could be properly derived from Penelope, who spun a braided web to deceive admirers during Ulysses' absence at Troy, in allusion to the reticulated pattern on the breast and foreneck of many guans. Lesson (1828) proposed the specific term *heliosylus* (Greek *helios*, sun; *sulao*, to carry off) for the Forest Bittern *Zonerodius*, giving it the substantive name "Héron Phaëthon". Phaëthon, vainglorious son of Phoebus, importuned his father to drive the chariot of the sun. However, the task proved beyond him and, being unable to control the fiery steeds, the chariot careered from its chosen orbit, causing universal darkness and natural catastrophes. In dire retribution the unfortunate Phaëthon was struck down by a thunderbolt. (The modern teenage joyrider is let off with a caution or undertakes counselling!)

Rules for the formation of eponyms have changed and been flouted over the years, and the apparent orthographical discrepancies which frequently occur have been compounded by the transliteration or spellings of, especially, Russian and Polish surnames, which have never been treated consistently, and current disagreements on the Swedish ö. Sibley and Monroe (1990) pointed out that the current ICZN rule regarding the replacement of the umlaut refers only to words of Germanic origin, and that Swedish eponyms such as *loennbergi* and *sjoestedti* should be spelled *lonnbergi* and *sjostedti*. Tyrberg (pers. comm.) does not agree with this interpretation, arguing that Swedish ö has been transcribed into oe since the Middle Ages, being derived from a mediaeval ligature for o+e, and questioning the need to change transcription rules which have been universally used for centuries.

Aboriginyms or native names have been derived from over thirty modern languages as well as ancient Greek and classical Latin. Naturalists of the calibre of Brian Hodgson, Andrew Smith, and Thomas Horsfield made frequent use of local names, and other authors found treasure trove in the non-Linnaean works of Marcgrave, Azara, the Comte de Buffon, and Levaillant. Earlier works give the etymology of the genus *Ducula* as Latin *dux*, *ducis*, leader, chief. In fact, this is one of Hodgson's Nepalese based names culled from the native "dukul" for the Mountain Imperial Pigeon *D. badia*. Bonaparte enters the fray again with *Chettusia*, his Franco/Italian rendering of a Russian name "keptuschka" for the Sociable Plover *C. gregaria* (an action that affronted Bowdler Sharpe, who pointedly refused to use the Prince's "nonsense-names" or amended them (*Chaetusia*) as he saw fit). In the never-ending quest for the true meaning behind *Oceanodroma castro* Alec Zino (pers. comm.) advises that "roque de castro", the name given to the Madeiran Storm-petrel on the Desertas, means "rock of the castle" in Old Portuguese, but finds it difficult to believe that illiterate fishermen would have invented such a name. He believes the name may be an onomatopoeia from one of the bird's incessant brooding calls, "rrrrrr oquedecastro". A delightful tale from Japanese classical folklore is revealed by *Gorsachius goisagi* for the Japanese Night Heron. The all-powerful Emperor Daigo (fl. 900) ordered a vassal to capture a Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax*. Upon hearing the imperial command the heron submitted itself to capture. The emperor was

pleased that the heron had confirmed his omnipotence over nature as well as man, granted it the title "king of the herons" and the position of fifth rank in his court (*go i*, fifth rank; *sagi*, heron), and released it unharmed. The abomination *Gorsachius*, also spelled *Gorsakius*, is Bonaparte's attempted latinization of the specific name.

Toponyms or geographical epithets are still popular specifically (e.g. Chinese Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus sichuanensis*, Emei Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus emeiensis* [a nomen nudum in Beaman (1994)]), and certainly prove more useful as specific tags than eponyms, although the early years of descriptive ornithology succeeded in littering nomenclature with unsuitable and erroneous toponyms. Of interest are the Lilac-tailed Parrotlet *Touit batavica*, a Neotropical species probably shipped to Europe through the West Indies, but named after Batavia on Java in the East Indies; the Far Eastern Curlew *Numenius madagascariensis*, which has never occurred in Madagascar, and undoubtedly the victim of a typesetter's error for *macassarensis*; and the Gentoo Penguin *Pygoscelis papua*, based on Sonnerat's outrageous claim that he had seen no less than three species of penguin in New Guinea! The Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica* was discovered by Olof Rudbeck in Lapland in 1695. He was impressed by its beauty, inspired by the male being coloured like the Swedish flag (the yellow in the Swedish flag had a more orange hue in the seventeenth century), and named it *Avis Carolina* after the Swedish king Carl XI. By 1758 the absolute powers of the monarchy had been abolished, and Linnaeus, who normally followed his mentor Rudbeck closely but had strong links with the Hattarna parliamentary faction, doubtless considered *Carolina* to be politically incorrect, and based the name *svecica* on the Swedish flag.

Under the heading taxonym (names concerning relationship and affinity) mention can be made of the use of anagrams (*Nilaus* from *Lanius*, *Dacelo* and *Lacedo* from *Alcedo*, *Delichon* from *Chelidon*), and the combinations of generic and substantive names beloved of French authors in the last century (producing such hybrids as *Phylidonyris*, *Talegalla*, *Jacamaralcyon*, and *Jacamerops*), and not forgetting *Phedina*, a true Bonapartism, combining a misspelled Greek adjective (*phaios*, brown) and part of an Italian substantive name (*rondine*, a swallow). The more prosaic genus *Ninox*, proposed for the Brown Hawk Owl *N. scutulata* by Hodgson in 1837, is a combination of the now synonymized genera *Nisus*, hawk, and *Noctua*, owl.

Habitat names or bionyms were formerly more popular, but not always accurate. Vieillot (1825) named the Lark-quail *Ortyxelos*, "marsh quail" (Greek *ortux*, quail; *helos*, marsh) since, never having seen a live specimen or knowing anything of its habits, he believed, from its long legs and semi-naked thighs, that it was related to the sandpipers Scolopacidae and inhabited marshes. The Yellow-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus goiavier* was named "Le petit Goiavier" by Sonnerat (1776) because he observed it perching in guava trees near houses in Manila (French *goyavier*, guava tree).

Ergonyms or behavioural names rank low in the statistical scale. Swainson's (1832) genus *Andropadus* (Greek *aner*, *andros*, man; *opados*,

follower) was founded on Levaillant's (1802) name "L'Importun" for the Sombre Greenbul *A. importunus*, because it followed hunters and warned other birds and game by its incessant and wearisome calls. Gould's (1839) *Agriornis* (Greek *agrios*, fierce; *ornis*, bird) reflected the savage habits of the Grey-bellied Shrike Tyrant *A. microptera*, which had a reputation amongst the natives of Chile for attacking and killing the young of other birds.

Of minor importance are phagonyms (food or prey names), although such as *Sphecotheres* and the Edible-nest Swiftlet *Aerodramus fuciphagus* mirror fancy rather than fact, and it is now known that, despite their generic appellations, most antbirds (*Myrmeciza*, *Myrmoborus*, *Myrmoderus*, and so on) follow ant armies to feast on the other insects flushed by the advancing swarms rather than on the ants themselves.

Despite the value of voice amongst birds gerynyms (voice names) figure rarely in nomenclature, although aboriginyms are frequently based on onomatopoeia. Many epithets describe the sound of the voice or call itself (Hoopoe *Upupa epops*, Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*, Wattled Guan *Aburria aburri*). More obscure terms may be illustrated by the Chinspot Batis *Batis molitor*, so named for the song of the male being likened to the sound of grinding millstones (Latin *molitor*, miller), and the Ryukyu Robin *Erithacus komadori*, erroneously given a specific epithet based on the Japanese name for the Japanese Robin *Erithacus akahige* whose unmusical song is considered to resemble the neighing of a horse (*koma*, horse; *tori*, bird). *Akahige*, "red beard", is the traditional Japanese name for the black-throated Ryukyu Robin, but there is speculaion that this apparently erroneous name was originally *akai-ke*, "red hair" (Hiraoka Takashi pers. comm.).

Finally, two years ago it was proposed that a new species of vireo, discovered in the Chocó rainforests of Colombia, be named after the company or individual donating the most money towards its conservation and the preservation of its dwindling habitat. It remains to be seen if this strange alliance between worthy cause and market forces sets a precedent for nomenclature in ornithology in the twenty-first century. Perhaps *Vireo icii* will be indexed in a second edition of Sibley & Monroe?

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